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ABSTRACT

This paper defines communication assessment in terms of the four characteristics of communication identified by John Daly, which propose that: (1) communication is interactive and dialogic; (2) communication occurs in real time; (3) communication is inherently contextual; and (4) communication is personal as well as social. The paper then examines the literature concerning the skills involved in communication assessment. The review of the literature on communication assessment is organized into the following categories: adaptability, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, communication performance (including nonverbal communication), language use, critical thinking skills, and listening skills. The review suggests that: (1) communication goes beyond the use of simple skills to involve sensitivity to the situation and adaptability to changing behaviors and goals; (2) effective communicators must convey a sense of social comfort and maintain a relaxed environment; (3) effective communicators are sensitive to the impact of proximity and body language; (4) critical thinking skills play a dominant role in effective communication because of the speaker's need to constantly adapt to and evaluate the communication context; and (5) listening skills are closely related to critical thinking in communication because listening requires that the interactants understand the words and phrases used and be able to concentrate on and effectively evaluate messages. Contains 83 references. (GLR)

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Speech Communication Skills for College Students

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Communication Competence Assessment

Before addressing the skills involved in communication assessment, it is useful to define it. In Robert Bostrum's Competence in Communication, competence is defined as "the knowledge of appropriate communication patterns in a given situation and the ability to use that knowledge" (Bostrom, 1984 p. 25). This definition hints at a variety of issues. One issue identified by John Daly is the importance of considering both the outcomes and performance of communication in assessment (Daly 1992a p. 6). This distinction highlights the problem of an individual adhering to the defined standards of effective communication and yet not achieving her or his goal. The assessment of communication skills must reflect both the successful performance of skills and the ability to accomplish communication goals.

The definition can be augmented further by four basic observations made by Daly. First, "communication is inherently interactive and dialogic" (Daly, 1992a p. 5). By this Daly is asserting that meaning is derived through interaction; it is not a product of an individual. He identifies several types of interactions including conversations, interviews, negotiations, meetings, and small group exchanges, in which understanding is dependent on all the participants.

The second assumption identified by Daly is that "communication occurs in real time" (Daly, 1992a p 5). Unlike written communication, there is no opportunity for revision in oral communication. The interaction is immediate and often occurs almost simultaneously with production. While some types of

communication such as public speaking provide preparation time and other situations allow for some augmentation or amendment of statements, communication performance entails a fundamental immediacy. Once a statement is made it can not be unmade and will consequently affect whatever communication follows.

The third assumption asserted by Daly is that "communication is inherently contextual" (Daly, 1992a, 5). The context is defined by the situation and the audience. More specifically, the communication strategies should reflect the purpose of the interaction (to inform, persuade, entertain, commemorate), the audience (size, relationship to speaker, attitudes towards topic, knowledge of topic), and the circumstances that surround the event. Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer (1978) use a three part matrix to define contexts -- occupational (e.g., ability to function effectively on a job interview), citizenship (e.g., ability to function in a court of law as a witness, a defendant or a juror), and self-maintenance (e.g., ability to explain and seek out help for medical problems). Effective communicators need to be sensitive to the particular context. For example, Daly states there would be different standards for communication for a large annual business meeting versus a small gathering of high school friends at a party.

Daly's fourth assertion is that "communication is personal as well as social" (Daly, 1992a p. 6). By this he is stressing the importance of recognizing an individual's choice of communication strategies-- a monolithic view of communication competence is inappropriate. Daly explains: "We are, in many ways, our talk. Consequently, people need to carefully respect a person or group's right to communicate as they deem efficient and appropriate" (Daly, 1992a p. 6).

Daly also contextualizes assessment in terms of the forms and functions of communication (Daly 1992a). Public speaking, conversing, interviewing, and meeting skills are among the forms of communication that he identifies. Daly notes in the assessment literature eight major functions of communication: (1) "influence and compliance gaining as well as resisting influence attempts, (2) information seeking and giving, (3) affinity seeking and maintenance, (4) conflict management, (5) expressing (self disclosure), (6) explanations and accounts, (7) coping strategies for problematic communication events (e.g., defensiveness, embarrassment), and (8) 'negative' behaviors that, nonetheless, mark effectiveness (e.g., inspiring guilt, using anger effectively)" (Daly 1992a, p. 26). These distinctions highlight adaptability as an important skill in communication.

In addition to the concept of adaptability, the material covered in the literature on communication assessment can be separated into several subcategories, specifically: interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, communication performance (including nonverbal communication), language use, critical thinking skills, and listening skills. Since many of the specific skills identified are interrelated, and consequently are appropriate to more than one category, this clustering of skills is somewhat arbitrary and is done only to facilitate their discussion.

Adaptability

As Daly has suggested, communication does not take place in a vacuum. An effective communicator is constantly adapting to the form and function of the communication act as determined by the situation or context. Adaptability

includes the evaluation of the situation and the implementation of a strategy appropriate to that situation. Thus, adaptability is demonstrated in several ways--the roles in which the communicator functions, the specific skills that the communicator performs, and his or her reactions to the variables in a given communication situation. An exhaustive list of variables is impossible but it would include reactions of the audience (are they confused, hostile, bored?) and changes in the situation (the discovery of new information, a change in the communication goals of the speaker, a disturbance in the physical space of the communication act).

Communicators need to be able to function in a variety of roles including group leader (e.g., an office manager directing a discussion on product development), mediator (e.g., an office manager resolving a dispute between employees), motivator (e.g., an office manager challenging employees to increase production), presenter (an office manager presenting a report on sales), and listener (an office manager listening to the safety concerns of employees) (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Hanna, 1978; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Boileau, 1982). Although an individual will not necessarily be able to perform every role with the same degree of skill, an effective communicator has a repertoire of roles.

Specific skills demanded by different roles include transmitting information (stating, questioning, instructing, ordering and interviewing); persuading individuals or groups of a similar, higher or lower status than that of the speaker; and managing conflict (Boileau, 1982; Di Salvo and Backus, 1981; Aitken and Neer, 1992; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982). Communicators need to be able to express their opinions, respond to the feelings and opinions of others, use humor and wit to diffuse tension, and

negotiate appropriate degrees of self-disclosure for themselves and the other interactants (Boileau, 1982; Duran, 1983).

Beyond simple demonstration of these skills, effective communicators must be sensitive to the situation, and to their fellow interactants, and consequently must adapt their behaviors and goals to the communication event. (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990; Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b; Boileau, 1982). For example, an effective communicator would be able to modify his or her communication goals on the basis of audience reaction (e.g., if met with hostility, an effective communicator might change her or his goal from persuading to giving information).

Interpersonal Communication

A concise, universally agreed upon definition of interpersonal communication is impossible. In broad terms it includes social interaction (including conversation), conflict resolution, and small group discussion. Barker defines it as "the extension of ourselves to other people and their extension to us" (Barker, 1987 p. 130). He further specifies that it generally occurs as face-to-face encounters (although telephone conversations are also included) and can take place in both formal and informal environments. Beebe and Beebe (1991 p. 5) define interpersonal communication as "face to face communication between two people." Adler and Rodman define it as "Communication in which parties consider one another as unique individuals rather than as objects. It is characterized by minimal use of stereotyped labels; unique, idiosyncratic social rules; and a high degree of information exchange" (Adler and Rodman, 1991, p. 458). Although none of these definitions is exhaustive, together they provide a

context for an understanding of the literature on interpersonal communication competence.

Because of the broad definition of interpersonal communication, it is useful to subdivide it. As is true in other communication contexts such as public speaking, adaptability is a critical skill for effective communicators. In smaller settings, communicators have greater opportunity to evaluate and therefore greater responsibility to respond to the cues given to them by the other interactants. Sensitivity for other interactants and the demonstration of that empathy is a basic interpersonal communication skill (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Cegala, 1981; Di Salvo, Larsen, and Seiler, 1976; Duran, 1992; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Murphy and Jenks, 1982; Parks, 1985; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Sypher, 1984; Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b).

Another issue important in interpersonal communication is self-disclosure. Effective communicators carefully negotiate the degree of self-disclosure in relation to a situation. Self-disclosure skills include expressing feelings to others (Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Glaser, 1983), suppressing feelings when their disclosure would be inappropriate (Muchmore and Galvin, 1983), being able to accurately recognize and control levels of self disclosure (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Duran, 1992; Glaser, 1983; Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987; Sypher, 1984; Canary and Spitzberg, 1987), and being able to assess accurately how one is perceived by others (Cegala, 1981; Duran, 1992).

Effective communicators also convey a sense of social comfort, which includes having the confidence to approach and engage in conversation with new people in new settings, demonstrating social composure, and maintaining

a relaxed posture and tone while communicating (Duran, 1992). In general and in the context of interpersonal interactions, communicators need a diverse repertoire of skills and approaches from which they can draw (Duran, 1989; Cegala, 1981; Parks, 1985). For example, they need to be able to demonstrate a variety of characteristics including assertiveness, expressiveness, and supportiveness (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Ratliffe and Hudson, 1987; Sypher, 1984). They need to be skilled managers of interactions (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Duran, 1989; Sypher, 1984; Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b). This includes initiating and managing conversations (Glaser, 1983; Ratliffe and Hudson, 1987; Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987), as well as specific activities such as clarifying perceptions (Glaser, 1983), giving feedback (Di Salvo and Backus, 1981; Ratliffe and Hudson, 1987; Curtis, Winsor, and Stevens, 1989), responding to criticism (Glaser, 1983), handling grievances (Hanna, 1978), building relationships (Ruben, 1976; Stanley and Shockley-Zalabak, 1985), and negotiating interruptions (Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987).

Effective communicators must also be able to provide leadership. These skills include the ability to motivate, to persuade, and to manage small group meetings (Hanna, 1978; Murphy and Jenks, 1982; Di Salvo, 1980; Glaser, 1983; Curtis, Winsor, and Stevens, 1989). They must also be able to perform social rituals, such as introductions, with ease (Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Rubin, 1981 and 1982) as well as managing situation-regulated interaction such as interviews (Di Salvo and Backus, 1981).

Humor is another useful tool for the effective interpersonal communicator. It can be used to diffuse social tension and an individual's anxiety, and to resolve conflict (Duran, 1992; Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987). Nonverbal traits such as eye contact, body posture, and gestures also contribute to the degree of

effectiveness of a communicator (Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987; Duran, 1989; Ruben, 1976). Such a broad range of skills involved in interpersonal communication requires an ability to evaluate and adapt effectively to a situation. Evaluation and adaptation includes the selection of style and strategy. It is dependent on a sensitivity to the diversity of the other interactants-- their diverse roles, attitudes, backgrounds, and opinions (Cegala, 1981; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Witkin, 1973).

Conflict management skills are another area important to interpersonal communication (Di Salvo and Backus, 1981; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Stanley and Shockley-Zalabak, 1985). Specific skills include a spirit of cooperation (Canary and Spitzberg, 1987), and an understanding of the complexity and diversity of issues and perspectives as well as of interactants (Sypher and Zorn, Jr., 1986).

Group problem solving is another aspect of interpersonal communication (Curtis, Winsor and Stevens, 1989, Di Salvo, 1980; Di Salvo, Larsen, and Seiler, 1976; Hanna, 1978; Lohr, 1974; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Hirokawa and Pace, 1983). Communicator attributes that contribute to problem solving include initiation of ideas, efficient requests for information, and the evaluation of ideas (Ruben, 1976; Curtis, Winsor and Stevens, 1989; Di Salvo, 1980; Hirokawa and Pace, 1983; Lohr, 1975).

Intercultural communication

An area relevant to interpersonal communication contexts and public speaking, intercultural communication is receiving increasing attention,

although there is comparatively little literature available on it. Intercultural communication occurs between individuals representing different cultures. Since communication standards, including nonverbal communication (proximity between interactants, gestures), language (including idiomatic expressions), the use of relationship markers (e.g., "Sir," "Honey," "Your Honor"), and perceptions, are largely culturally determined, an effective communicator recognizes and adapts to this (Aitken and Neer, 1992). This recognition is demonstrated with a sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds of other interactants. In addition, effective communicators need to feel secure within their own culture while remaining open minded about other cultures and communication styles (Atwater, 1989; Hymes, 1986). Other critical components to effective intercultural communication are a sense of empathy and an ability to deal with ambiguity without anxiety (Ruben, 1976).

Performance

Nonverbal communication is one of several important dimensions of effective communication. Standards of eye contact, posture, facial expressions, and display of interest vary depending on culture and situation, and are an important part of the transmission of messages (Ruben, 1976; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987). Another aspect of nonverbal communication is the proximity of interactants. Effective communicators are sensitive to the impact of proximity on

the message (Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b). In addition, effective communicators avoid distracting mannerisms while conveying a sense of relaxation and composure (Duran, 1983; Sypher, 1984). Effective communicators develop their ability to observe and evaluate the nonverbal behaviors of themselves as well as others (Parks, 1985).

The performance quality of communication involves more than just nonverbal behaviors. Voice--vocal quality, tone, volume, rate, and articulation--is naturally a critical aspect of effective communication (Rubin, 1984; Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Bassett, Whittington, Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Morreale, 1990; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Rubin, 1981 and 1982). In addition to the effective production of sound, effective speakers avoid vocalized fillers (such as "uhm") and develop an effective use of pauses (Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987; Wiemann, 1977a and 1977b; McCroskey, 1982).

Language

Related, of course, to the performance elements of communication is language choice. Effective speakers understand the power and importance of language beyond the obvious requirement of mastery of correct grammar and pronunciation (Duran, 1983; McCroskey, 1982; Morreale, 1990; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Hymes, 1986; Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Sypher, 1984). This awareness includes a sensitivity to language that indicates bias on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual/affection orientation (Ruben, 1976; Hymes, 1986).

Critical Thinking

Since a speaker must constantly evaluate and adapt to the communication context, critical thinking skills play a dominant role in effective communication. In addition to basic critical thinking skills including problem-solving techniques and clarity of expression, effective communicators must have a general understanding of the processes involved in communication, the ability to identify situation constraints and adapt to them, and the ability to organize material and develop supporting material.

General critical thinking skills demonstrated by effective communicators include their ability to recognize the purpose of messages and reflect on biases and perspectives of their own as well as others' (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Bienvenu, 1971; Forrest, 1979; Hunsaker, 1989; Larson, Backlund, and Barbour, 1978; Morreale, 1990; Rubin, 1981 and 1982). This entails the ability to recognize persuasive language and the differences between fact and opinion, as well as the ability to discern fallacious reasoning (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Hirokawa and Pace, 1983; Hunsaker, 1989; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Rubin, 1981 and 1982). Effective communicators need to be able to determine important issues and questions in and about the material, as well as to establish criteria by which to make judgments (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Hirokawa and Pace, 1983; Hunsaker, 1989; Murphy and Jenks, 1982; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Witkin, 1973). They also must be able to evaluate the adequacy, relevance, and reliability of evidence (Hunsaker, 1989; Morreale, 1990; Rubin, 1981 and 1982).

An effective communicator must value different communication styles but still be able to make judgments about the credibility of speakers (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990; Hunsaker, 1989; Larson, Backlund, and Barbour, 1978). She or he can evaluate messages holistically and predict the potential effectiveness of a message (Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Larson, Backlund, and Barbour, 1978). In the development and performance of their own messages, effective communicators express their ideas clearly and concisely (Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Bienvenu, 1971; Ewens, 1979; Morreale, 1990; Rubin, 1981 and 1982).

In addition to the critical thinking skills listed above, an effective communicator needs a grounding in basic theoretical principles related to communication. This includes understanding how the reflective thinking process works, argumentation and persuasion, communication as a historical process involving the development of meaning and form, as well as the differences between the mechanics of interpersonal and organizational communication (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Curtis, Winsor, and Stevens, 1989; Di Salvo and Backus, 1981; Ewens, 1979; Loacker, Cromwell, Fey, and Rutherford, 1984; McCroskey, 1982; Stanley and Shockley-Zalabak, 1985).

If speakers possess strong critical thinking skills and the background knowledge of the processes involved in communication, they are better equipped to recognize and adapt to situation factors (Duran, 1983; McCroskey, 1982; Aitken and Neer, 1992). This identification of situation factors includes an awareness of their own dominant communication style and their personal strengths and weaknesses as communicators (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990; Ewens, 1979). Also, effective communicators adapt their message to the constraints of the situation (e.g., time limitations, purpose of interaction, attitudes

of other participants) (Ewens, 1979; McCroskey, 1982; Morreale, 1990). Also dependent on situation or context, speakers need to be able to gather and evaluate supporting material and evidence for their messages (Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987).

The manner in which information is organized is another important way for speakers to adapt to a situation (for example, when explaining a process, an effective communicator needs to use a chronological order) (Aitken and Neer, 1992; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Di Salvo and Backus, 1981; Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Murphy and Jenks, 1982; Rubin, 1981 and 1982; Witkin, 1973).

Effective speakers need a broad repertoire of organizational structures as well as basic structural elements (Muchmore and Galvin, 1983; Aitken and Neer, 1992). Organizational structures include chronological (time order), cause-effect (explanation of an event and its consequences), classification (division of a topic into subcategories, problem-solution (identification and discussion of a problem and introduction of a potential solution to that problem), comparison (explanation of the similarities or the development of an analogy between the topic and something else), contrast (discussion of the differences between the topic and something else) and spatial (explanation of a topic by the physical relationship between elements of the topic, e.g., discussion of the Gulf War through a discussion of the countries involved). Structural elements include a preview of main points (a statement that introduces the main points that the speaker plans to address during the presentation), a statement of credibility (establishment of the speaker's knowledge of and relationship to the

material being discussed), transitions (phrases that link the major ideas together), a review statement (a summary of the major points that have been covered during the presentation), and closure (the clear, fluid conclusion of the presentation).

Listening

Listening skills are closely related to critical thinking. At the most basic level, listening requires that the interactants understand the words and phrases (Backlund, Brown, Gurry, and Jandt, 1982; Bassett, Whittington, and Stanton-Spicer, 1978; Rubin, 1981 and 1982). In addition, listening requires interactants to concentrate on and effectively evaluate messages (Bienvenu, 1971; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990; Cegala, 1981; Curtis, Winsor, and Stevens, 1989; Di Salvo, 1980 and 1981; Di Salvo, Larsen, and Seiler, 1976; Hanna, 1978; Hunsaker, 1989; Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Rubin, 1984; Stanley and Shockley-Zalabak, 1985; Sypher, 1984; Witkin, 1973). Interactants can accomplish effective listening by searching for main ideas and critical supporting points, developing a sense of empathy, and developing an awareness of biases both on the part of the speaker and the listener (Hunsaker, 1989; Larsen, Backlund, Redmond, and Barbour, 1978; Muchmore and Galvin, 1983). Effective listeners are also sensitive to nonverbal cues of interactants.

Speech communication encompasses a diverse range of skills that need to be evaluated and selected with sensitivity to the situation and the other interactants. Since each aspect is relevant in so many different contexts the division of skills into sub-categories is somewhat arbitrary. However, a few basic concepts are important to recognize, including adaptability, interpersonal

communication, intercultural communication, performance (including nonverbal communication), language use, critical thinking skills, and listening skills.

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